

Emergency care and rehabilitation of baby song birds workshop May 13, 2007: Knowing when to help, and when to stay away

by Liz Jozwiak

The warmer weather, longer days, and the quick snow melt is a good indication that spring is just around the corner. It's also the time of the year when the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge starts receiving calls from the public about injured or abandoned baby birds and nestlings.

Most songbirds such as the warblers, juncos, thrushes, and sparrows arrive on the Kenai Peninsula to breed by late May to early June. Flycatchers and pewees arrive a few weeks later. These songbirds are also known as "neo-tropical migrants" because they winter as far south as Central and South America, and migrate to Alaska to breed. All songbirds are born helpless, as are woodpeckers, hawks, owls, crows and ravens. Their eyes are usually still closed, and they have few or no feathers. They are completely dependent upon their parents for warmth and nourishment. Waterfowl and grouse-type birds, on the other hand, are usually feathered and able to feed themselves within a few days after hatching.

It is our human nature to help a baby bird which looks as though it has fallen out of a nest. The chick was either trying to leave the nest prematurely, may have fallen out, or was learning to fly. In some cases our help is appropriate, in other cases it is not.

If you spot an animal, particularly a young or juvenile animal that appears to be deserted or in difficulty, do not catch it right away. Take 20 minutes or so to observe its behavior. Try to locate its nest. It should be close by. Look in heavy brush, hollow tree branches, and in shrubbery. Some birds such as juncos and robins are ground nesters, so the nest may not be in a tree, but on the ground or in shrubs.

In the case of a young or juvenile animal, it may simply be waiting for a parent to return. Remember, adult animals will often leave their young to hunt for food and return within a short period of time to feed/care for the offspring.

If you believe the animal is injured, call the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021 BEFORE you pick up the animal.

Injured or baby birds need special handling. Keep an eye on its whereabouts and describe its condition to the biologist or bird rehabilitator you reach on the phone. They will give you the proper course of action to take for that particular animal.

Even if you find another nest of the same species with nestlings in it, you may be instructed to put the baby there. This is especially successful for swallows, or if the baby is still naked and blind. If the baby bird seems warm and active, put it back in the nest immediately.

Don't worry that because you have touched the chick its parents will abandon both it and the nest. The majority of birds do not have a highly developed sense of smell. They will not "smell" a human and reject the nestling if you replace it in the proper nest. The parent birds may abandon a nest that they are building if it is bothered, but they are not likely to abandon a nest once the eggs have hatched.

If you find a feathered baby bird that is not in a dangerous situation (away from dogs, cats, roadways), it is best to leave it alone. The parents are probably nearby and will take care of the baby. Several species of birds (i.e. jays, towhees, American Robins) continue to care for their young and, in fact, finish the fledgling's education at ground level.

Many baby birds leave the nest before they are able to fly. The reason they do this is varied. It could be that the nest became too small to accommodate all the babies (they've been growing at a rapid speed) or because parasites have invaded the nest, or because they sense they have a better chance against predators being out of the nest, but mostly because the parents have coaxed them, one-by-one, out of the nest because they knew instinctively it was time for their babies to take their first flight!

The parents have not abandoned them; they are close by, watching and caring for these babies. They bring food to them throughout the day and within a short period of time (days) the babies are flying, not gracefully, but flying short distances and then they fol-

low their parents who will show them the best sources of food and water.

The best thing to do is to leave the baby bird there. If you have picked the chick up, bring it back to the exact area you found it and place it in or under a bush. The parents have, most likely, been frantically looking and calling for this lost baby. You can wait and watch for a few hours to make sure the baby bird is OK, but do this from as far away as possible so you don't frighten the parents who are waiting for a safe time to approach the baby bird. If after watching from a distance for several hours you cannot see the bird's parents, follow the previous instructions and call the Kenai Refuge.

The one exception is if a baby bird is in an obviously dangerous situation like sitting in the middle of the road. Pick it up and place it in a nearby bush where parents will still find it easily.

If you find a baby duck, shorebird or grouse, try to locate the parents and the rest of the brood. Release the baby nearby and leave the area so that the adults and baby may find each other by calling. These babies are feathered and can feed themselves even if the parents do not find them right away.

The worst-case scenarios are where the parents have been injured or killed, the nest blown down or destroyed, leaving the baby injured, cold, or lethargic. In these situations you will need to contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator who specializes in baby songbird care.

Remember, most species of birds are federally protected and therefore it is not legal to keep them unless you are licensed to do so. Beyond the legalities, these animals require specialized care and diets to grow up

healthy and strong. It's important to turn them over to an experienced person as soon as possible.

In Alaska, as in most states, wild bird rehabilitation is governed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Most large communities have established wildlife rehabilitation centers such as the Bird Treatment and Learning Center (BIRD TLC) in Anchorage. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has filled this niche locally with the help of a team of baby bird network volunteers. I'm one of the federally licensed bird rehabilitators on staff who trains and works with a few very dedicated private citizens in the Soldotna/Kenai area who are legally permitted to provide home care to baby birds that cannot be returned back to the wild.

This year we will be recruiting additional baby bird volunteers who would like to join our rehabilitation network and receive training. There will be a Baby Bird Training Workshop on Sunday May 13, 2007 from 1pm to 5pm at the Environmental Education Log Cabin at the Kenai NWR Headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna. The class is limited to 20 individuals, and pre-registration is required. Please call 260-2818 to register.

While the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is fortunate to have a small network of experienced baby bird rehabilitators, humans nevertheless make poor substitutes for bird parents. If you happen across a small ball of feathers learning to fly, resist the temptation to rescue it. Its parents are probably not too far away.

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